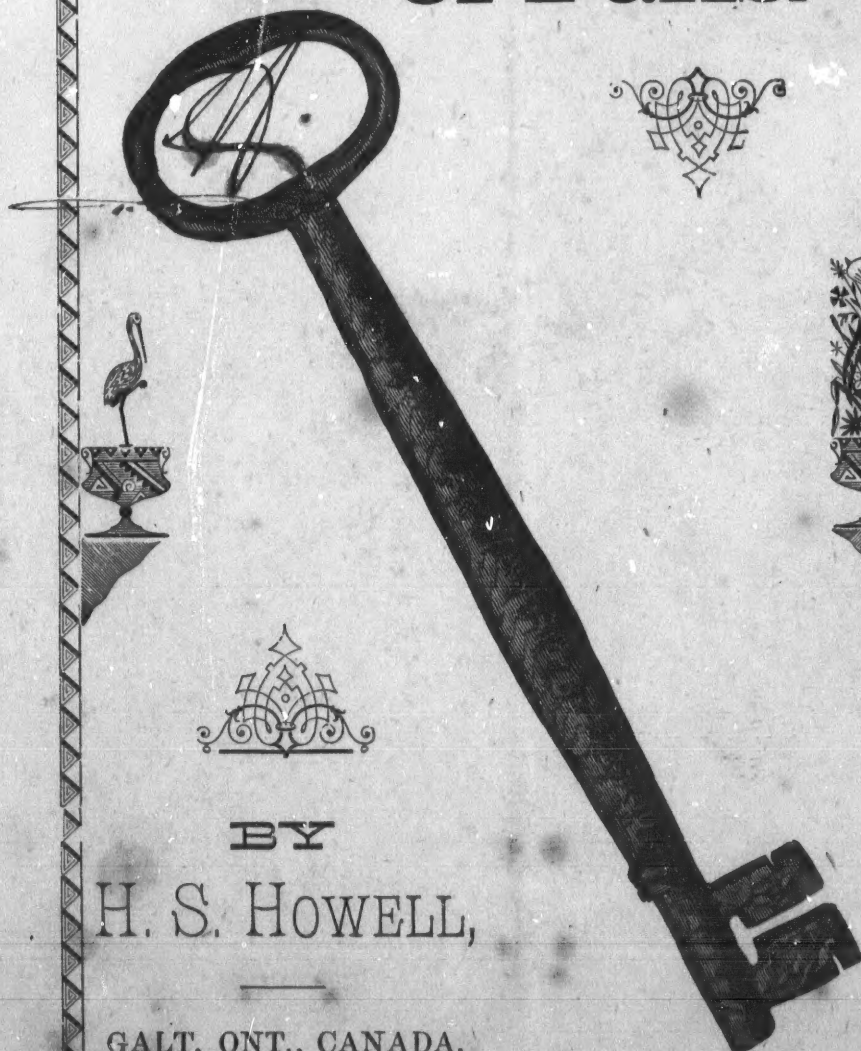


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Howell, Henry S.

—\*THE\*—  
**KEYS OF THE BASTILLE,**  
**Of Paris.**



BY  
**H. S. HOWELL,**

GALT, ONT., CANADA,

1887.



*Henry Marguerite*

*Symphonist*  
THE

# KEYS OF THE BASTILLE, Of Paris.



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# THE KEYS OF THE OLD BASTILLE OF PARIS.

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BOUT seven years ago—I think it was in October, 1879—I noticed an editorial paragraph in the *Toronto Mail*, stating that the keys of the celebrated Bastille of Paris were in the possession of a St.

Louis locksmith, he having purchased them of a young emigrant named Lechastel. It appears that when the great prison-fortress fell, in 1789, the Governor—the old Marquis de Lannay—was dragged out into the street and there despatched ; while the mob surged into the building to put an end to the Swiss Guard and the Invalides, (had they not surrendered) and to search for trophies. Among the first who entered the courtyard of the Bastille was one Carwin Lechastel by name, and when the draw-bridge fell he secured a bunch of keys from one of the fleeing gaulers. These he stuck on the end of his pike and carried through the streets. Those who took part in this event were considered heroes by the Parisians at that time, and Lechastel kept the keys in his possession as a great trophy of the Revolution ; and they remained in the family until 1859, when a descendant of his emigrated to America, taking the old keys with him. Not long afterwards he found himself in very reduced circumstances in the city of St. Louis, Mo., and having gone through what little money he had he resolved to sell the old heirloom. At first he was unsuccessful ; few believed his story, and he could speak but little English, but one day his attention was

directed by the sign of a "great golden key," hanging outside the locksmith's shop, belonging to Mr. John Hamilton, on Morgan St., and he went in and made him understand what he had for sale. I do not know what he asked for the old relics, but Mr. Hamilton bought them and placed them on exhibition in his shop, at the theatre, in newspaper offices, and various places during the last twenty-five years. After fruitless endeavors to communicate with the "Keeper of the Keys," I went to St. Louis in September, 1886, for the express purpose of tracing up these antiquities, and after a great deal of trouble I found them. The owner would not part with the curiosities at first, as he had kept them so long, and had refused many offers for them, but eventually I arranged to purchase the keys and brought them home with me to Canada. Here they are, five in number, the largest looking old enough to have been used by Hugues Aubriot, the Prevost of Paris, who built the Bastille in 1369. It is nearly twelve inches long and very heavy. The smallest is of fine workman-ship ; it is made of steel and the socket is shaped like the clover-leaf or *fleur-de-lis*. This key is supposed to have belonged to the treasure-room—for Henry IV. of France kept his valuables in the Bastille. One of the keys has a heavy beveled head and is six inches in length ; and the other two are about ten inches long and seem to have been at one time plated with brass—traces of which are still to be seen.

The Keys of the Bastille? What strange traditions cluster round these old pieces of iron ; and what weird thoughts are conjured up by the very sight of them ! They seem to speak to us ; each telling the same sad story of the glories and the horrors of the past. "Vanished is the Bastille," says Carlyle in his *French Revolution*. "What we call vanished : the body or sandstones of it hanging in benign metamorphosis for centuries to come, over the Seine waters as *Pont Louis Seize*, the soul of it living perhaps still longer in the memories of men."



Oh, what scenes of anguish and agony took place within the eight stern towers, witnessed only by the Governor, the gaoler (and his keys) ; for many a poor prisoner sent thither by *lettres de cachet* or Madam de Pompadour was never heard of after he crossed the fatal draw-bridge ! It is said that Aubriot was not only the first Governor, but was also the first man to be imprisoned in the stronghold ! The place was besieged very often. When Charles VII. re-took Paris, the English and their allies shut themselves up in the Bastille, but capitulated in 1436 ; and when the Duc de Guise took it he confined the whole Parliament there in 1588.

That notable subject of controversy and mystery of the Court of Paris, "The man in the iron mask," was incarcerated here after his imprisonment at the Ile Ste Marguerite, in the Mediterranean. Many writers have endeavored to solve the problem of his identity. Some assert that he was the Duke of Monmouth, nephew of James II., others maintain that he was Count Matthisly, but the majority are of the opinion that he was the "twin-brother of Louis XIV. born two hours after the royal infant had received the homage and acclamations of the courtiers." An heir to the throne of France was hailed with the greatest joy. It had been predicted by two astrologers, several months before, that France would be torn by dissensions and by civil war, caused by the rivalry of two claimants to the throne. When the birth of the second twin-brother, therefore, was announced to Richelieu and to the King, the prediction seemed fulfilled. The law of France recognizes the *last* born twin-child as the *heir*. "One of the twin-children had already been publicly proclaimed as the Dauphin, the heir to the French throne. Gloom and dismay seized upon the king's mind, which Richelieu sought to dispel by arranging that the last-born son could be sent away and brought up far from the precincts of the court." He was placed in the hands of some faithful person, and when he grew up Captain St. Mars took him to the Fort of Pignerol. The "iron mask" was fastened on his

face, and he was condemned to wear it day and night, waking or sleeping, *for the space of upwards of forty years!* It is affirmed that his likeness to his mother—Anne of Austria—and to his twin-brother, was so manifest that he would at once have been recognized.

The old Marshal Richelieu himself was an inmate of the Bastille at one time.

Louis XI., fiend incarnate, made use of the dungeons of the Bastille for some of his most horrible deeds of cruelty; and when the place was torn down his *oubliettes*—iron cages—and “monstrous stone-blocks with padlock chains” were unearthed by the workmen, and skeletons found walled up were brought to light. State secrets and correspondence were discovered in the archives and given to the winds; and many a letter reached the outside world for the first time. Here is one dated at the Bastille, Oct. 7th, 1752:—

“If for my consolation Monseigneur would grant me for the sake of God and the Most Blessed Trinity, that I could have news of my dear wife; were it only her name on a card, to show that she was alive, it were the greatest consolation I could receive, and I should forever bless the greatness of Monseigneur.”

Alas! poor writer, how often has thy heart seemed to stand still at the sound of the gaoler's keys in the rusty lock? And the answer never came. Yes, many, many times the grating of these cruel keys has been listened to with a shuddering sense of some strange impending horror, by the victims of brutal tyranny; buried alive, far from the sight of day, the sounds of life, to perish by inches—or by the hand of the midnight executioner.

In one history of the Bastille, the author says in speaking of it when the infamous L'Hermit was Governor:—



"Human ingenuity, aided by fiends, never invented more terrible places for the torment of human beings. \* \* \* \* He caused the victims sent him by the King to be placed on a trap-door, through which they fell, striking on wheels armed with sharp points and cutting edges ; others he stifled by closing up all air to their dungeons, or tied stones about their necks and made walk into a deep and filthy pool he had provided for the purpose. \* \* \* \* There were five ranks of chambers, only differing one from the other in its horrors. The most dreadful were those known as the 'iron cages,' six feet by eight, composed of strong wood and lined with iron plates. These were invented by Louis XI., who had two built at Loches, in which Ludovico, Duke of Milan, was confined, and in which he ended his days. Louis XII., while Duke of Orleans, was also confined in one of these iron cages. The second rank of chambers for cruelty were in the top of the towers ; in these rooms a man could not stand upright, and the windows admitting light and air were pierced through the ten feet walls, and were obstructed by several rows of grates. In many cases the outer window-grates were covered with cloth and also darkened by window-shutters, fixed in such a manner that all view was intercepted from the prisoner. These in summer were insufferably hot, and in winter piercing cold. The dungeons under the towers were filled with mud, from which exhaled the most offensive odors, and which were over-run with toads, newts, rats, and spiders."

"With spiders I had friendship made,  
And watch'd them in their sullen trade,  
Had seen the mice by moonlight play,  
And why should I feel less than they ?  
We were all inmates of one place,  
And I, the monarch of each race,  
Had power to kill—yet, strange to tell !  
In quiet we had learned to dwell—  
My very chains and I grew friends,  
So much a long communion tends  
To make us what we are."

It was in these dark and loathesome places that the tyrant, Louis XI., imprisoned those whom he was desirous of destroying by protracted sufferings. Here, in dungeons, the bottoms of which were covered with sharp cones, that their feet might have no resting place nor their bodies any repose, were placed the Princes of Armagnac, who were taken out twice a week and scourged in the presence of the Governor of the Bastille. The eldest of the Princes went mad under this treatment, and the younger was released by the death of Louis. "It was from the petition of the Princes, published in 1483, that these dreadful truths were obtained, and could not have been believed or imagined with a less convincing proof."

The details of De Latude's escape from the Bastille in 1749 rival Monte Cristo's wonderful adventures at the Chateau D'If !

The early customs of the Bastille continued down to the last days of its existence. Long after the necessity of cruelty and persecution had ceased—if it ever was necessary—they were in vogue from force of habit in this horrible State prison.

\* \* \* "Necessity, the tyrant's plea,  
Excused his devilish deeds."

The occupation of the officials was mainly to interrogate and annoy the prisoners, to lay snares for them, and by the meanest artifices entrap them into confessions. They pretended to have proof of crime, would exhibit papers, but would not let their unhappy victims see them.

They were continually insulted in the grossest manner, caressed and menaced ; every infliction was put upon the poor unfortunate creatures, until the once proud spirit became cowed and weak, and ready to snatch at any chance to say or do that which might be the means of gaining its dear liberty. "This torment went on from day to day, frequently ending in insanity or death."

How terrible must have been the feelings of the accused courtier—called perhaps from some state banquet, or from the midst of his dear ones—"by order of the King," on alighting from the carriage or chair, to find himself before the awful portals of the dread Bastille ! O, the unspeakable despair ; the crushing knowledge of all hope bereft !

Sometimes the Sovereign would pay an official visit to the Bastille, and go through the farce of inspecting that which really would not bear inspection. We can imagine Mary Queen of Scots—"our" Mary—attending one of these State visits, on the arm of her young husband, that precious gallant—Francis II.

"Ho, there ! way for their majesties !" Ah, fair majesty, if these old keys could have but whispered in thine ear the word "Fotheringay" perchance thy prophetic soul might have taken the warning from its source alone.

On the 14th July, 1789, a Parisian mob, numbering about one hundred thousand and aided by the soldiers of the guard, stormed the Bastille. For four hours the conflict raged, till at length the garrison, exhausted, surrendered. Then followed a scene of butchery, many of the defenders being put to the sword or hanged ; among whom were the Governor and Lieutenant.

The historian tells us that :—"De Launay, discovered in grey frock with poppy-coloured riband, is for killing himself with the sword of his cane. He shall to the Hotel-de-ville, \* \* \* through roarings and cursings, hustlings, clutchings, and at last through strokes ! Your escort is hustled aside, felled down.--Miserable De Launay ! He shall never enter the Hotel-de-ville : only his bloody 'hair-queue'. The bleeding trunk lies on the steps there ; the head is off through the streets ; ghastly, aloft on a pike. Rigorous De Launay has died ; crying out, 'O, friends, kill me fast !' Merciful De Losme must die. \* \* \* One other officer is massacred ;



one other Invalide is hanged on the lamp-iron. Provost Flesselles, stricken long since with the paleness of death, must descend from his seat, 'to be judged at the Palais Royal':—alas to be shot dead, by an unknown hand at the turning of the first street. \* \* \* Along the streets of Paris circulate seven Bastille prisoners, borne shoulder high; seven heads on pikes; the Keys of the Bastille and much else \* \* \* Evening sun of July, how, at this hour, thy beams fall slant on reapers amid peaceful woody fields; on old women spinning in cottages; on ships far out on the silent main; on balls at the Orangerie of Versailles, where high-rouged Dames of the Palace are even now dancing with double-jacketed Hussar-officers;—and also on this roaring hell-porch of a Hotel-de-ville !'

That gallant regiment, the Swiss Guard, bore the brunt of the Revolution, and was finally completely annihilated in 1792. These noble soldiers defended the King and the royal family in the Palace of the Tuilleries, against hordes of the maddened furies of Paris.—“of the basest and most degrading wretches a great capital hides from the eyes of the better inhabitants, but nourishes in the darkness till some great convulsion exposes the hideous brood to the light of day.” History records no more striking example of loyalty, valor and self-sacrifice ! In the town of Lucerne, in Switzerland, the most interesting attraction is the “Lion Monument;” an immense sculpture carved out of the solid rock, 28 feet long and 18 feet high. It represents a dying lion—pierced by a spear—protecting the shield of the Bourbons; and commemorates the heroism of the illustrious Swiss Guard.

“A thousand glorious Actions, that might claim  
Triumphant laurels and immortal Fame.”

Nothing remains of the Bastille, the great towers and bastions have all disappeared; the “ashlar stones” being built into bridges, or broken up into paving stones. In the centre of the *Place de la Bastille* stands the *Colonne de Juillet*, a

bronze column, 154 feet high, erected in honor of the "heroes" of the Revolution of July, 1830. But the artizan, passing along the Rue St. Antoine to and from his work, seldom thinks of the grim battlements that once looked down in place of this gilded monument,—*a la gloire des citoyens*.

It was on that beautiful spot, the *Place de la Concorde*, that upwards of 2,800 persons perished in "the reign of terror."

Here, in the days of Louis XIV.—the "Father of New France"—the nobility and aristocracy would congregate and sun themselves in the presence of the Grand Monarch; while stupid plebeians craned their necks to catch a glimpse of Royalty, only to have their shock-heads shoved aside by attendant outriders and postillions. Wait, wretched *canaille*, a day will come when other heads are to be "shoved aside," and your ill-shod feet will dance a merry jig—a *la carmagnole*!

Two handsome fountains ornament the gardens, but Chateaubriand once remarked that "all the water in the world would not suffice to remove the blood-stains which sullied the place."

To-day it is one of the fashionable resorts of the Parisians; gay crowds assemble here to listen to bands of music, and watch the flashing equipages whirling by; decorated officials strut around, and little children play about the splashing waters. At night the scene is even more brilliant; thousands of coloured lamps illuminate the place, along the pathways and in among the trees; the gas-lights ascending the *Champs Elysees* as far as the Triumphal Arch, form, apparently, "an interminable avenue."

But the historian, or antiquarian, sees not the giddy throng; he looks back to the "dismal days" when the guillotine reared its sanguinary form on this fair spot, which had become the "throat of the tiger!"

Dumas gives a very graphic description of some of the scenes which were enacted at that terrible time :—

“Every day twenty-two were regularly shot. By this time, the fear of life rendered death sweet. Girls, men, children, prayed that they might be shot with their parents. Sometimes they permitted this, and little boys and girls were shot holding their father's hands.

Women who were seen to shed tears at executions were shot.

Mourning was prohibited under pain of death.

One lad of fourteen, says, ‘Quick—quick ! You have killed papa ! I want to overtake him !’

One De Rochefort was accompanied by a son to the butchering-ground, whither he went with three relatives. The men fell—the boy aged fifteen, remained standing.

The executioner hesitated—the people murmured.

‘God save the King !’ cried De Rochefort.

A moment—a report—he fell, shattered to death.

A lovely girl, fourteen, is brought before the judge for refusing to wear the national cockade.

‘Why do you refuse to wear it !’ asks the judge.

‘Because you *do* !’ replied the child.

Her beauty, rather than justice, pleading for her, a sign was made that a wreath should be put in her hair, the emblem of liberation.

She cast it upon the ground. She died.

A man came to the Hall of Justice.

‘You have slain my father, my brothers, my wife—kill me. My religion forbids me to destroy myself.’ In mercy, kill me.’

In mercy—they killed him.

A girl of seventeen, and much resembling Charlotte Corday, was accused of having served as an artilleryist in the trenches of the forces opposed to the national forces.

‘What is your name ?’

‘Mary ; the name of the mother of the God for whom I am about to die.’



'Your age?'

'Seventeen ; the age of Charlotte Corday.'

'How !—at seventeen, fight against your country !'

'I fought to save it.'

'Citizeness—we your judges, admire your courage. What would you do with your life if we gave it you ?'

'Use it to kill you !'

She ascended the scaffold, alarmed at the crowd of people—fearless of death. She refused the executioner's help—cried twice, 'God save the King !'—and lay down to die."

Such was the Revolution which immediately followed the fall of the Bastille.

La Fayette secured the key of the main entrance—Porte St. Antoine—and sent it to General Washington, and it is now to be seen at Mount Vernon.—(See Note.)

As the Bastille was an immense building, with innumerable cells, corridors and dungeons, there must have been a great number of keys in use ; and very likely there are many in existence at the present time though scattered and perhaps unknown.

The authorities at Paris have already collected together twenty-seven of the keys of the Bastille, deposited in the "Archives Nationales."

Valuable as they are now—as curiosities—they were priceless a hundred years ago and more. A king's ransom could not buy them ; for had they not the keeping of many a royal minister whose knowledge of kingly doings was far too complete to be allowed to go unchecked.

If certain inanimate objects could be endowed with power of speech what wondrous tales we should hear,—beside which the magnificent fiction of the "Arabian Nights" would fade into insignificance. And yet, if so, what could be found that could narrate a life story more thrilling than the Keys of the Old Bastille of Paris.



NOTE.—After my letter appeared in the *Toronto Mail* (Oct. 9th, '86), I received many communications from historical and antiquarian societies, and from private individuals. Amongst the latter were letters from Mrs. E. B. Washington, a lady well-known in literary circles, and a great grand-niece of Gen. Washington. This lady is a member of the Mount Vernon Association, of the United States, representing the State of West Virginia. The tomb and home of Washington are owned by this Association, which has for its Executive Directors—one chosen from each State; and they meet annually to supervise and direct the affairs of the Association, and see personally that the superintendant and employees at Mount Vernon properly carry out their trust. From her acquaintance with the key which La Fayette had sent over to "his friend and comrade," Mrs. Washington expressed a wish to see the keys which I had succeeded in obtaining. So I went up to London, Ont.,—where her son is the U. S. Consul—and took my old treasures with me. Mrs. Washington was very much interested in them, and said that from the strong likeness between my keys and that at Mount Vernon, there could be no doubt of their genuineness; time has stamped them alike with the hall-mark of age, and the exercise of their employment is only too evident in the bent and twisted handles.





Large photographs—registered according to Act of Parliament of Canada—of the Keys of the Bastille (exact size), with letter-press description, have been sent to :—

The British Museum.  
Musée de Cluny, Paris.  
Bibliothèque National, Paris.  
Bibliothèque Carnavalet, Paris.  
Numismatic and Antiq'n Society, Montreal.  
Museum of Melbourne, Australia.  
Society of Antiquaries of London.  
Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.  
Canadian Institute.  
Mount Vernon Association.  
Buffalo Historical Society.  
Harvard College.  
University of Michigan, etc.

These institutions have acknowledged and accepted the photograph, and I received a letter from Her Majesty's Librarian at Windsor Castle thanking me for the very interesting photograph of the Keys of the Bastille. "It has been shown to the Queen and will be placed in the Royal Library."

